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ABSTRACT

With more and more cultural backgrounds represented in the American classroom, it is important that faculty consider the cultural variables that are introduced in such a situation. Cross-cultural awareness in the multi-cultural classroom has become an important issue in recent years for two main reasons: a continued increase of international students studying in the United States and an increased emphasis on faculty skills for dealing with minorities in the classroom. The areas on the "Cultural Bound Areas for Personal Reflection" survey can be obstacles to the learning process because they can be interpreted and emphasized in significantly different ways depending on an individual's cultural background. Awareness of these areas offers opportunities to improve classroom interaction through greater understanding. Culture shock can occur when individuals experience confusion, anger, or despair as a result of unsuccessful attempts to make sense of cultural practices which are different and usually involves four stages: the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. Sensitivity with cross-cultural differences leads to cross-cultural awareness, which in turn leads to improved cross-cultural understanding. Cross-cultural sensitivity (and subsequent awareness) in the multicultural classroom encourages the creation of learning opportunities out of possible obstacles. (A self-reporting instrument of Cultural-Bound Areas for Personal Reflection and 21 references are attached.) (MG)

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THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM: WORKING TO CREATE OPPORTUNITIES OUT OF POSSIBLE OBSTACLES

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to help faculty understand their cross-cultural awareness in the classroom and to provide a means for improvement in this area. This objective is addressed through the use of a self-reporting instrument that faculty can use to gauge their awareness of primary areas of cross-cultural difference in the classroom. The author proposes sensitivity with cross-cultural differences leads to cross-cultural awareness, which in turn leads to improved cross-cultural understanding.

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Concern with the multicultural classroom has increased considerably during the past 30 years. With more and more cultural backgrounds represented in the American classroom it is important faculty consider the cultural variables that are introduced in such a situation. These variables can serve as obstacles or as opportunities in the learning process. The goal of this paper is to help faculty understand their own cross-cultural awareness in the classroom and to provide a base for improvement in this area. This goal is addressed through the use of a self-reporting instrument that faculty can use to gauge their awareness of primary areas of cross-cultural difference in the classroom. This report will not go as far as to outline right or wrong approaches because each situation is unique.

It is the author's contention cross-cultural misunderstandings that occur among world cultures parallel cross-cultural misunderstandings that occur among American subcultures. Both are grounded in a lack of shared experiences and frames of reference. The author proposes sensitivity with cross-cultural differences leads to cross-cultural awareness, which in turn leads to improved cross-cultural understanding.

Cross-cultural awareness in the multi-cultural classroom has become an important issue in recent years for two main reasons: a continued increase of international students studying in the United States and an increased emphasis on faculty skills for dealing with minorities in the classroom. Regarding the latter, acts of racism have increased

significantly on college campuses during recent years and minorities have responded by emphasizing the need for cross-cultural sensitivity in and out of the classroom. Unfortunately, faculty approaches to maintain cultural equilibrium in the classroom can be mistaken for cross-cultural insensitively.

A survey, entitled "Cultural Bound Areas for Personal Reflection," is included at the end of this paper as Attachment #1. These cultural bound areas are areas that can be interpreted and emphasized in significantly different ways depending upon an individual's cultural background. Thus, they can be obstacles to the learning process. The survey is based on an outline of culture bound areas which was created by the National Association of Developmental Education.

This is a self-reporting instrument. Faculty indicate their responses to each statement in each area: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Again, these are areas which are frequently interpreted and emphasized differently depending on the individual's cultural background. Awareness of these areas offer opportunities to improve classroom interaction through greater understanding.

This survey can help faculty gauge their cross-cultural awareness by comparing and contrasting their perceptions with others who complete the survey. This instrument focuses on teacher expectations, standards, personal perspectives, approaches in common situations, and how these areas can

benefit or detract from the classroom environment. Interpretation of these areas can vary depending on a persons cultural or subcultural background.

The survey addresses areas which are common bases of misunderstanding among faculty members and international students. For instance, section I statement F states "If a student is caught in an academically dishonest action, he/she should be expelled from school." This can be a troubling area as what is "academically dishonest" in one culture can be a preferred approach in another culture. Plagiarism in the American culture is a serious offense that can result in expulsion from school. Plagiarism in China is commonly practiced since "no one owns an idea as their very own." Thus, books are frequently copied from since "ideas belong to the masses."

Awareness of these areas is also beneficial when working with the variety of subcultures that comprise the United States culture. Misunderstandings among American subcultures are very similar to misunderstandings among international cultures. Both types of misunderstandings are based on differing frames of reference. These differing frames of reference do not necessarily indicate opposite interpretations of the culture bound areas, rather they imply various interpretations on the same continuum (but differing in varying degrees depending on the cultural backgrounds compared).

Culture is the backdrop within which teaching and learning takes place. We all use our cultural background to "filter" what we are perceiving in the classroom. Thus, the American faculty member can actually experience "culture shock" in his/her own classroom without leaving the country.

Culture shock occurs when we experience confusion, anger, or despair as a result of unsuccessful attempts to make sense of cultural practices which are foreign to us. This usually occurs when we are outside of our own culture (in another country) but it can happen when dealing with culturally different individuals in our own culture. Culture shock usually involves four stages: the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment stages.

The honeymoon stage occurs during our initial interactions with a new culture when we are intrigued with new places and new ways of living. The crisis stage occurs when we encounter a situation which we do not know how to resolve and we become frustrated. The recovery stage occurs when we learn how to resolve the situation. The adjustment stage occurs after we have resolved the conflict and begin to enjoy the culture again.

The aforementioned situation involving differing views on academic dishonesty (between the U.S. and China) exemplifies a culture shock situation which the author experienced while teaching in China. First, he enjoyed learning new things about the Chinese culture (honeymoon).

Second, he observed students plagiarizing from outside sources when writing their papers (crisis). Third, he found plagiarism is a common practice in Chinese universities (recovery). Fourth, he told his students this was against the way he had been trained in the U.S. but that he would adopt the Chinese approach on the issue since he was in China (adjustment).

The author has experienced paralleled situations in the U.S. when working with culturally different students. The following four steps describe such a case. First, the author had two Vietnamese students who were new to the U.S. He was interested in getting to know them as he is interested in Vietnamese history and they were "boat people" who had escaped from Vietnam (honeymoon). Second, their understanding of American culture was minimal and they had great difficulty understanding various assignments in the classroom (crisis). Third, the author modified their assignments, basing them on universal understandings, so the Vietnamese students could complete the course objectives (recovery). Fourth, the author and the students achieved an academic basis for common understanding (adjustment).

Working to create opportunities out of possible obstacles, in the multicultural classroom, requires an appreciation of interpersonal communication. There are many rules of interpersonal interaction to consider when studying cross-cultural communication. One such model involves high

context communication processes and low context communication processes. In high context cultures speakers present messages indirectly and let meanings evolve. Much is communicated through paralanguage cues and gesturing. High context cultures are located mainly in the Orient.

Speakers in low context cultures are more direct when presenting messages. Low context cultures are found mainly in the United States and European countries. Awareness of these perspectives is based heavily on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Obviously there is much room for confusion and incorrect interpretation of intentions.

Different perceptions of the culture bound areas are not always a matter of differing values. Values can be similar but the expression of these values, based on cultural communicative norms, can vary significantly. Cross-cultural understanding can become especially difficult because different perceptions of culture bound areas can be a matter of differing values and differing communication processes. Thus, a high degree of tolerance is beneficial.

There has been a marked increase of racism on college campuses across the United States. These situations have generally involved blatant actions exhibiting little, if any, understanding of cultural backgrounds other than dominant culture white America. Although this is a serious problem, one which could become worse before it improves, we obviously cannot focus total attention on it in our classrooms. But,

how we teach our classes can be more important (with this issue) than what we are teaching. That is, actions speak louder than words. Thus, a multicultural classroom environment which is sensitive to various cultural and subcultural backgrounds is going to help provide considerable understanding for students of all backgrounds. Obviously the faculty member has a direct influence on this classroom environment.

It is a myth to believe it is enough to treat culturally (or subculturally) different students like they are from your own culture (or subculture). Such a view is too ethnocentric. A basic goal can be to create a classroom environment which meets culturally different students "halfway." Intentions to establish a clear understanding can serve as a base for clear understanding. The following recommendations, general and specific, can help enhance such intentions.

Generally speaking, awareness of the affective, cognitive, and interpersonal domains of cross-cultural interaction can provide a basis for improved relations. The affective domain involves acceptance and respect of other cultural backgrounds. The cognitive domain emphasizes knowledge and understanding of other cultural backgrounds. The interpersonal domain strasses the development of communication skills for interacting with various cultural backgrounds.

A specific approach starts with faculty members tape recording their lectures for personal review. Particular areas for evaluation include the use of sarcasm, language norms, vocal animation, supporting statements through repetition and substantiation, level of vocabulary, pronunciation and articulation, and rate of speech. All of these areas can be variables in cross-cultural interaction.

Specific analysis of the following survey areas can also be beneficial.

I. A. Teacher-student communication should be based on formal (rather than informal) interaction.
II. A. I handle emotionally charged issues and conflict by never losing control of myself or my control over the classroom.
II. B. Humor is essential in the classroom.
III. A. It is important for me to treat students the same. They should never know if I really like them individually or not.

These areas can be evaluated using taped lectures. Again, it is important to realize these areas can vary from culture to culture. In doing this type of evaluation one should consider how his/her approach fits within his/her own culture/subculture and how his/her approach could possibly conflict with other cultural/subcultural approaches.

Cross-cultural sensitivity (and subsequent awareness) in the multicultural classroom encourages the creation of learning opportunities out of possible obstacles. Faculty self-evaluation in this area is the first step toward understanding our weaknesses (and strengths) regarding how we can promote a better understanding of not just what we teach but <u>how</u> we teach it.

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SA - strongly agree
A - agree
N - neutral
D - disagree
SD - strongly disagree

CULTURAL-BOUND AREAS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

I. EXPECTATIONS AND STANDARDS	SA	A	N	D	SD
A. Teacher-student communication should be based on formal (rather than informal) interaction.	5	4	3	2	1
B. Dress and cleanliness is important	5	4	3	2	1
C. If a student is academically unprepared, it is primarily his/her own fault.	5	4	3	2	1
D. Students should have alot of free time.	5	4	3	2	1
E. Respect for authority is important	5	4	3	2	1
F. If a student is caught in an academically dishonest action, he/she should be expelled from school.	5	4	3	2	1
II. APPROACHES	**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
A. I handle emotionally charged issues and conflict by never losing control of myself or my control over the classroom.	5	4	3	2	1
B. Humor is essential in the classroom.	5	4	3	2	1
C. I enjoy some students less than others.	5	4	3	2	1
III. PREFERENCES	**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
A. It is important for me to treat students the same. They should never know if I really like them individually or not.	5	4	3	2	1
B. I prefer group (instead of individual) learning activities.	5	4	3	2	1
C. I prefer docile (instead of aggressive) students.	5	4	3	2	1

"Today we are faced with the pre-eminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships--the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace."

Franklin D. Roosevelt
April 11, 1945